ASTROTENT

October 2007

We had a feature-packed meeting in October with local retailer (and long-time club member) Jim Kendrick and scheduled speaker (and brand-new club member) Stephanie Choquette. The meeting was well attended, with three first-time visitors (Karen, Louis and Yvon), a visit by Stan Runge, and the usual list of NYAA characters.

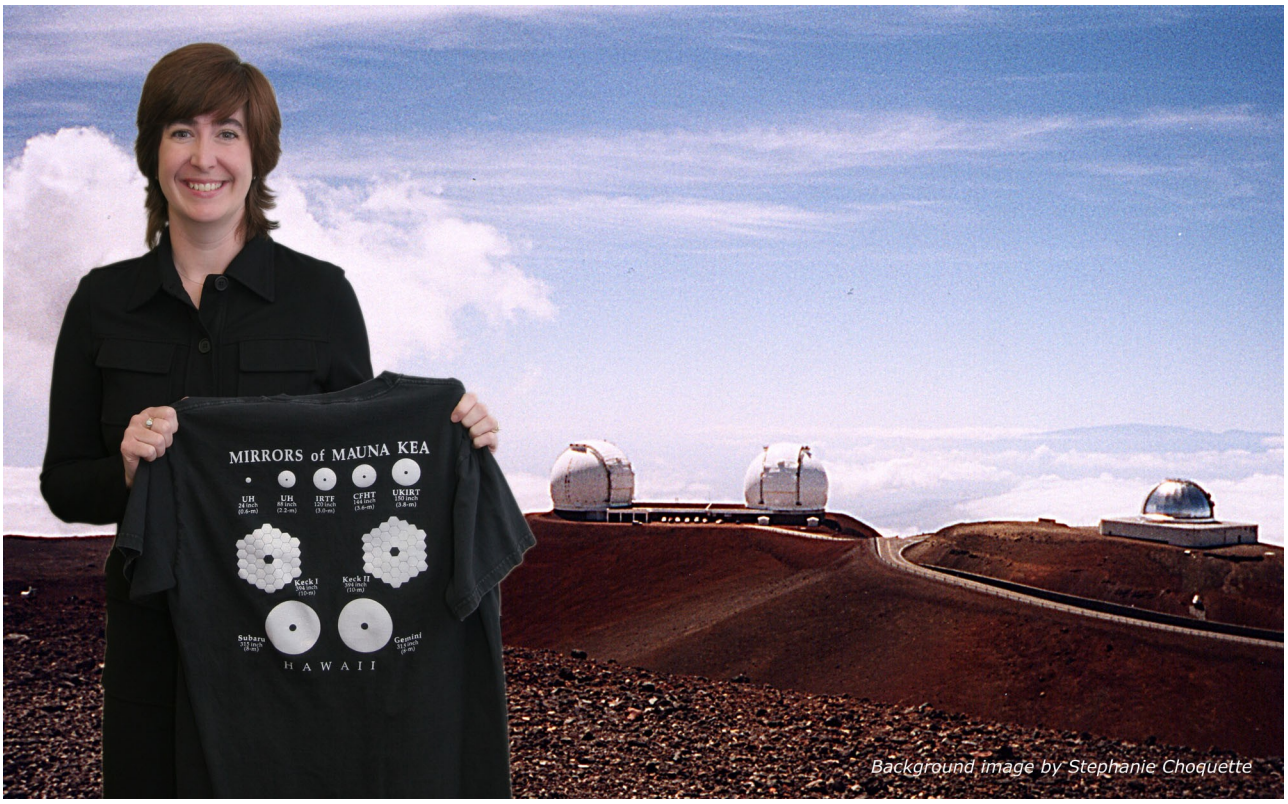
Malcolm opened the meeting by announcing the intention to create a number of special interest group to encourage more member participation. Suggestions for topics included light pollution abatement, workshops, astronomy software, astrometry and photometry.

The plight of the David Dunlap Observatory was brought up. The surviving Dunlap family members intend to sell the site, sharing some of the proceeds with the University of Toronto. The fate of the observatory itself is unclear at this time. The NYAA executive asked Heide DeBond to draft a letter of support for the observatory to be sent to the U of T Board.

Cathy announced that comet 17/P Holmes was in outburst and had attained naked-eye visibility. (Several of NYAA's finest attempted to view the comet from the parking lot, failing miserably, not realizing that the extra "star" in Perseus was in fact the intended quarry. Mea culpa!) Over the next couple of months Holmes provided photons aplenty – and probably more digital images that any other comet in history!

November's featured retailer was Jim Kendrick. Jim popularized the now ubiquitous dew-remover system and his observing tents are a regular sight at any star party. Jim showed a novel type of astro tracking platform, AstroTrac. This compact unit will

easily fit into a moderately-sized camera bag, without sacrificing any of your equipment! The device uses a tangent arm with a variable rate drive to track at the sidereal rate for up to two hours. Jim was an integral part of the development team, refining the design to meet the needs of serious astrophotographers. In particular the (optional) polar scope is now held magnetically in place for accurate and repeatable alignment. The AstroTrac will also support a small telescope, making an ideal grab-and-go system.



Our guest speaker for the evening was Stephanie Choquette. Stephanie entertained us with a slide show and description of her trips to Hawaii's mountain top observatories. Stephanie worked for several years as a nurse in Hawaii, specifically choosing this off-shore state over the mainland to fulfil her desire to visit one of the world's great astronomical observatories.

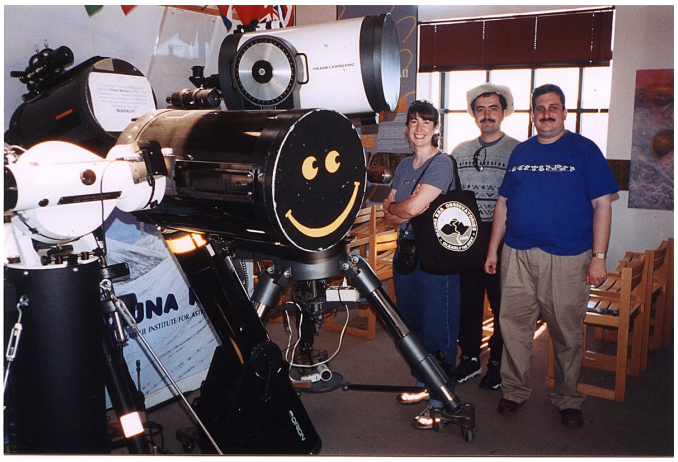
During her stay in Hawaii, Stephanie visited the Mauna Kea site a total of three times. The telescopes there (Gemini, Keck, and Subaru among others) are located 14000 feet above sea level and are the workhorses of current observational astronomy research. The site is open to the public, but you do need to sign waiver forms (in various degrees of legalese) to visit the individual observatories.

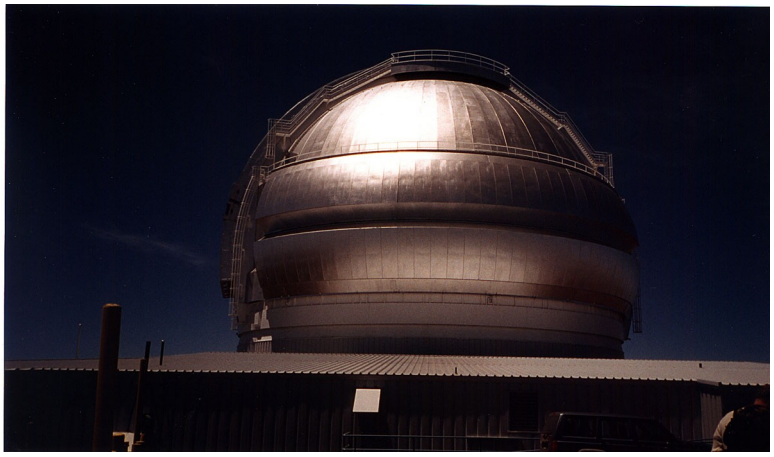
The trip to the top starts off from the base at Hilo. Four-wheel drive vehicles are mandatory for the ascent – and there are some rental companies which discourage the use of their vehicles for this purpose! Everyone is required to stop at the 9000-foot level to allow a certain amount of acclimatization to the altitude. There is a gift shop here (naturally!) as well as a number of telescopes available for public use, including a 14-inch Celestron SC. Many people stop here on the way back down for a mini star party.

The air at 14000 feet is thin and dry, so altitude sickness is an ever-present danger. Visitors can lessen the probability by keeping themselves well-hydrated and by avoiding any strenuous activities. Visitors may also have to dress for winter conditions – the peak can become snow covered at certain times of the year and the nights are usually quite cool.

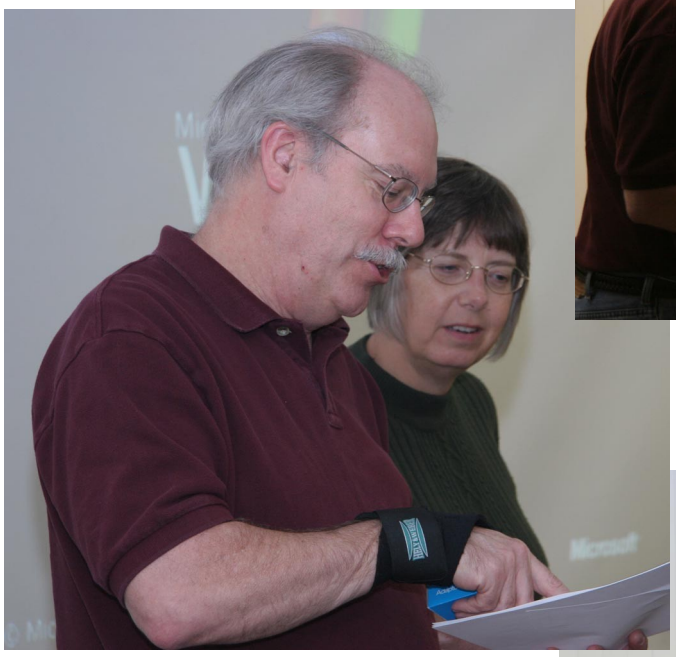
Because Stephanie was part of a group with a special interest in astronomy, they were able to get a more detailed look at the facilities – Ian Shelton led one tour of the Subaru scope. Stephanie's enthusiastic description left many of us dreaming of a time when we could make the same trip!

All images on this page courtesy of Stephanie Choquette






HOMELAND SECURITY




Smurfit-MBI